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Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

The MiGs Will Come Later

Tough talk by White House aides not responsible for national security raised the issue of MiG21s for Nicaragua to a premature peak that will make it harder for President Reagan to play the strong hand he must when the Soviet warplanes actually enter the Sandinista arsenal.

That time is estimated by high officials at three to six months from now. By crying wolf in a series of background briefings for reporters who were covering Reagan's vacation at his California ranch, presidential aides jumped the gun. Then they pulled back completely when it could not be proved that the cargo of the Soviet freighter vessel Bakuriani included identifiable crates of Soviet fighters.

That gives the appearance of U.S. approval for whatever military cargo was aboard, inviting salami tactics for Soviet arming of its Central American client state. U.S. intelligence officials now believe backup equipment for Czech L39Z jet trainers constituted a major part of the Bakuriani's cargo. If the Sandinistas can get away with off-loading this, they can get away later with deliveries of the trainer itself.

The L39Z's function is to train pilots for advanced jet fighters. The MiGs will follow. "They wouldn't start with MiGs," a Pentagon official told us. "That's where they'd end after conditioning world opinion."

Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and CIA Director William Casey wanted to play this first Nicaraguan MiG scare with public silence cloaking secret diplomatic

warnings. Instead, following the initial leak from mid-level Pentagon sources as the Bakuriani left the Black Sea on its way to Nicaragua, White House aides opened up the briefing door for hungry reporters.

But the real blunder came when the presence of the MiGs could not be proved. The White House failed to make the vital point that even without MiGs, the Bakuriani's cargo was one more fateful step on the way to a U.S.-Soviet crisis in Central America.

Sandinista preparations for accepting jet fighters more advanced than any aircraft in Central America never have been concealed. Nicaraguan strongman Daniel Ortega told the world last summer that his air force existed for military, not political, reasons. A new airfield near Managua is almost completed—with at least eight and possibly many more revetments built to safeguard parked MiGs.

Soviet helicopters, in the Sandinista inventory for months, recently have been upgraded. About a dozen MI24 Hind assault gunships landed within the last month on the Caribbean side of Nicaragua. These are capable of spreading "yellow rain" and other chemical poisons against anti-Sandinista guerrilla fighters.

The introduction of these Soviet arms in Central America is the equivalent of introducing gunpowder in the bow-and-arrow age. Yet, official Washington's reaction has been surprisingly restrained, probably out of fear that candidate Reagan would be called a warmonger en route to his landslide.

There is no doubt the next escalation

will be the Czech-built L39Z. Nor do U.S. intelligence reports leave any question that the important part of the Bakuriani's cargo was backup equipment for this jet trainer: spare parts, tools, ladders, engine-starter carts, wheels, tires.

The trainers will soon be flown by Nicaraguan air force pilots who have been training in Bulgaria. U.S. military and intelligence officials are preparing themselves for the MiG21 itself early in 1985. Actually, intelligence insiders are not yet fully satisfied that the Bakuriani's cargo did not contain the first crates of the L39Z itself, perhaps secretly off-loaded at night.

But to judge from the way White House aides have been briefing reporters, that is not an issue between the United States and the Sandinistas. The administration has drawn the line only against MiGs. The Czech aircraft is exempted on grounds that it is only a subsonic trainer, and therefore acceptable.

To realists in the Pentagon and the CIA, that argument is sophistry; it sounds plausible, but in fact it is misleading to all concerned—including American citizens. That should be clear when the Czech plane becomes part of the scenery in Nicaragua.

With the White House failing to make its case against the trainer aircraft, the Soviets and their Sandinista allies will have understandable doubts about the United States' making its case against the MiG21s. Tough talk from White House aides who had nothing to be tough about is to blame.

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